

Who do you name as your closest friends? Believe it or not, this question is a matter of great concern to the Lord. And that's because your friendships speak loudly - both to God and to the world - about the condition of your heart.

Have you ever thought to pray, "Lord, what do You think of my friendships? Are they pleasing to You - or do they displease You?" The fact is, a righteous friend can provide a link to the blessing and favor of God, because he encourages you toward a godly lifestyle. On the other hand, an unrighteous friend can be a binding chain to every kind of evil, leading you into terrible bondages.

As I use the word "friend" throughout this message, I'm not referring to immediate family members, such as a spouse, parent or child. My definition of a friend here is someone with whom you are closely associated - one in whom you naturally confide. In short, a friend is someone with whom you walk, talk and bare your soul.

Of course, you probably have various circles of friends. You have a "business" circle, which includes your co-workers, partners or clients. And you have a "social" circle, including those people you associate with on a surface level. You may also have contact with ungodly acquaintances. The apostle Paul says it's impossible for us to avoid these kinds of contacts - otherwise, we'd have to leave the world altogether!

Yet the circle of friends God cares about most is your intimate circle - your bosom pals. These are the people you love most, and who have an influence in your life. You're naturally attracted to one another, and you agree on most

Your Friends Matter to God!

things - so you feel safe opening your heart to each other. In short, you have an affinity with one another.

Our hearts are constantly sending out signals - messages that attract in others what is deepest in us. I've seen this truth powerfully illustrated in our congregation at Times Square Church. For instance - a lustful, sensual woman may walk into a service for the first time and look around the sanctuary. Within minutes, she'll make a connection with every man in the congregation who has a roving eye. Her very character sends out signals that attract like hearts.

During one service, I watched in amazement as a connection was made between two young drug addicts. One of them had dropped out of our rehab program, never having let go of his cocaine habit. As he sat in our congregation, he studied every face - and soon he made a connection with another struggling addict. After the service, I saw the two young men walking down the street together, talking secretly. There had been an unholy attraction - and their spirits connected!

On the other hand, I once observed with interest a godly seminary student who was attending our services. I wondered whom this young man might find as a friend. Then one night after a service, I saw him talking with two other very devoted believers.

Something about this young man had attracted those godly people - and the signal was caught!

Now, the Bible tells us we are not to be ignorant concerning satan's seductions. And one of the devil's most common attacks against us is to bring into our inner circle of friends someone who's under deception - an agent of hell who's on a mission to destroy us. Satan uses this ploy especially with lonely or compassionate Christians. He tries to turn an undiscerning person's kindness into an affinity with an evil spirit!

I once had a minister friend who'd been delivered from a drinking problem years earlier. Somehow he developed a close friendship with a pastor who lived hundreds of miles away - a man who had never been delivered from his own alcoholism. The two began conducting revival meetings together and sharing each other's burdens. And soon this other preacher convinced my friend there was no evil in drinking moderately. He seduced my friend back to drinking - and within a short while, both men became alcoholics, lost their churches and ended up on the streets of New Orleans.

I believe the devil sent this drinking man into my friend's life. Satan knew he couldn't get to him any other way so he brought into his life a supposed friend, to destroy him!

Let Me Show You From the Scriptures What Happens When a Godly Person Joins an Affinity With an Unrighteous Friend!

King Jehoshaphat was a righteous man who ruled over Judah when the kingdom of Israel was divided. This man's heart was fully set on God, and he was blessed and honored above all others in his generation: *"And the LORD was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David..."* (2.CHR 17:3).

Yet, scripture says, Jehoshaphat joined an affinity with evil King Ahab, who ruled the northern kingdom of Israel: *"Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honour in abundance, and joined affinity with Ahab."* (2.CHR 18:1). The Bible says of Ahab, *"...(he) did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."* (1.KIN 16:33).

You may wonder - how could a righteous king like Jehoshaphat end up joined in affinity with such an ungodly man? I believe there is only one reason for this unholy alliance: It was part of a satanic plot to destroy the righteous Jehoshaphat!

You see, Jehoshaphat had purged the land, driving out all the idols of Baal and slaying the idolatrous prophets. Yet Ahab's wicked wife, Jezebel, worshipped Baal - and she knew what Jehoshaphat had done to her idols. So she set her sights to bring down this godly man!

Jezebel devised a plot with her wicked daughter, Athaliah, to infiltrate Jehoshaphat's godly court. Soon young Athaliah met Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram - and she used all her feminine charms to win his heart. The plan worked: Jehoram decided to marry Athaliah - and he went to his father to ask for his blessing. Foolishly, Jehoshaphat granted it.

When scripture says Jehoshaphat joined an "affinity" with Ahab, it means they were "joined by marriage". The devil must have danced with glee at this union! Now Jehoshaphat would have constant contact with the wicked Ahab and be subjected to the charms of his wicked daughter. Simply put, evil had entered Jehoshaphat's inner circle!

Eventually, when Jehoshaphat died, Jehoram took the throne -

and Jezebel began calling the shots. The nation quickly returned to idolatry. And Jehoram even ended up killing his six brothers. Yet, this was only the beginning of the bloodshed spilled throughout Judah.

And it all happened because Jehoshaphat allowed himself to join an affinity with an ungodly man. The tragedy is, he didn't have to. You see, it would have been impossible for Jehoram to marry Athaliah without his approval. Why didn't Jehoshaphat tell his son, "This woman you love is full of idolatry - she's in rebellion against the Lord! She'll only give you evil counsel and turn you away from God. I'm telling you, Jehoram - drop this relationship right now, before it destroys you!" Instead, Jehoshaphat never said anything.

In addition, Jehoshaphat had the scriptures available to him, in which David stated very clearly: *"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."* (PSA 1:1). *"I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and of them that keep thy precepts."* (PSA 119:63). Jehoshaphat knew all this - yet still he wouldn't take a stand!

Jehoram and Athaliah's marriage produced a son named Ahaziah, who took the throne at age forty-two. The Bible says of this man, *"He also walked in the ways of the house of Ahab: for his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly."* (2.CHR 22:3). Suddenly, Athaliah was the court counselor in Judah. And scripture says this evil woman *"...destroyed all the seed royal of the house of Judah."* (verse 10).

I'm convinced this had been Satan's plan all along - to destroy the godly seed of Judah! You see, this was the lineage of David - and the scriptures prophesied that from this lineage the Messiah would come.

Beloved, you can be sure the devil would try everything he could to cut off the seed of Christ. Likewise, if you're a follower of Jesus - if you're now in the blood lineage of Christ - Satan will try to bring into your life someone to destroy everything godly in you!

Let Me Tell You How You Can Know Whether Satan Has Planted One of His Agents as a "Friend" to You!

Right now, you may be thinking, "Wait a minute - I don't want to start doubting my friends. I don't want to suddenly become suspicious of them." My answer to you is, if they're true friends - if they're knit to your heart in the Spirit of Christ - you have nothing to fear in examining your relationships with them. And you'd better look at all your friendships in the light of Scripture - or you could lose your very soul!

It's easy to determine whether your close friendships are of God, or if they've been planted by the enemy to destroy you. Simply think of your best friend, and then answer these questions:

- * **Does your friend gossip, backbite or speak evil of others?**
- * **Is he argumentative about scripture, a continual debater, never coming to truth?**
- * **Does he call godly people "Pharisees"?**
- * **Do you detect in his words a spirit of disobedience, envy or suspicion?**
- * **Does he spew out poisonous words against his (or her) spouse?**
- * **Has he succeeded in planting unkind thoughts in your mind about others?**
- * **Have you begun to join him in spewing out bitterness?**

If your friend fits this description - and you're being drawn farther away from Jesus because of this friendship - you can know the devil has planted that person in your life. He has the spirit of Ahab - and he's been sent to destroy the work of Christ in you!

On the other hand, a true, godly friend will always take the side of God's Word in any matter, and not just your side because you're friends. Such a friend won't counsel you in the bitterness of sin. Instead, he'll love you enough to tell you the truth.

Let me show you what happens to every child of God who joins an affinity with a bitter, unrighteous person. There are three awful consequences:

1. You'll Be Drawn Into Somebody Else's "War" or Problems - to Your Own Regret!

The Bible tells us Jehoshaphat's kingdom had been peaceful up to this point: *"And the fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, so that they made no war against Jehoshaphat."* (2.CHR 17:10). Judah was blessed and prospered abundantly, and nobody dared come against them.

But after Jehoshaphat joined an affinity with Ahab, scripture says, *"...Ahab... persuaded him (Jehoshaphat) to go up with him to Ramoth-gilead... And he answered him, I am as thou art, and my people as thy people; and we will be with thee in the war."* (2.CHR 18:2-3). Jehoshaphat willingly got sucked into a hopeless war - one that God had no part in!

The Hebrew word for "persuaded" in this passage means "a soothing seduction". Jehoshaphat allowed himself to be seduced into war by Ahab, answering, "I am as you are." In other words: "I'm your friend, so I'm with you all the way. I won't let you down. You can count on me!"

Is your close friend full of bitterness, hatred, anger - and pursuing a war of some kind? Is he involved in a marriage war, a family war, a personal war? And are you like a Jehoshaphat to him, offering help and encouragement? If so, look out - you're about to be seduced into it all!

That's right - very soon you'll find yourself smack in the middle of your friend's mess - and you'll be asked to take a stand. If your friend is in a troubled marriage, for example, you're going to be forced to take a side. And you'll end up sympathizing with him - all the way through his divorce!

Beware, Christian - whenever you extend comfort or encouragement to someone who's in rebellion, you take sides against the Holy Ghost. And that makes you a partaker in that person's sin. Tragically, when Jehoshaphat joined Ahab's war, he only hastened his friend along the path of destruction!

2. You'll End Up Ignoring All Prophetic Warnings and Scriptural Counsel!

Recently, a woman came to me after leaving her husband. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "God spoke clearly to me. He told me I had to leave my husband, because he had something better

for me than this marriage." Tragically, this woman's best friend "received the same word from the Lord" - and encouraged her to divorce!

If you have an ungodly friend in your inner circle, he'll give you all the reassurances you want, even if you're in error. In fact, satan will fill your head with the voices of false prophets, all claiming to speak truth. They'll say, "Go ahead - everything's all right. God is behind you." But they'll lead you to very the brink of destruction!

I'm sure Jehoshaphat was convinced he was acting righteously when he pledged to join Ahab in war. In fact, scripture says, *"And Jehoshaphat said unto the king of Israel, Enquire, I pray thee, at the word of the LORD to day."* (2.CHR 18:4). He said, "Let's ask the Lord for His word on the matter. We won't act until we hear from Him!"

So Ahab called on his four hundred false prophets: *"...And they said, Go up; for God will deliver it into the king's hand."* (verse 5). All four hundred voices agreed: "It's okay to go to war. God is with you!"

But Jehoshaphat wasn't convinced. He asked Ahab, *"Is there not here a prophet of the LORD besides, that we might enquire of him?"* (verse 6). Jehoshaphat wanted a man he knew was holy. So Ahab sent for the prophet Micaiah, who had been jailed for speaking truth.

When Micaiah showed up on the scene, this fearless man mocked everything that had taken place. He even prophesied Ahab's death, saying, *"...I did see all Israel scattered upon the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd..."* (verse 16). He was saying, "You're going to die in battle, Ahab. And God's people will be scattered over the hills!"

God made His Word to Jehoshaphat and Ahab clear, leaving no doubt as to what He thought about the whole affair: "It's doomed! Go at your own risk. Nothing but death and defeat await you on the battlefield!"

At this point, Jehoshaphat seemed willing to obey a true prophetic word. He appeared to want to do everything God told him. Yet, for centuries, theologians have marveled at what happened next: When the clear word came, Jehoshaphat ignored it!

Micaiah seemed to sense Jehoshaphat's reluctance to obey. And he ended his warning with these words: *"...Hearken, all ye people."* (verse 27). I believe Micaiah was looking directly at King Jehoshaphat and saying, "You, sir - heed my word! This is all a demonic deception. It can only end in destruction! Can't you see your friendship with Ahab is all wrong? He's an idolater! Please, don't listen to all these lying voices."

Yet, incredibly, the very next verse reads: *"So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat the king of Judah went up to Ramoth-gilead."* (verse 28). Jehoshaphat marched off to war with Ahab - totally ignoring God's warning!

Beloved, you can boast all you want about loving God's Word and wanting to obey it. But if you don't break away from the deception of ungodly friends and seek Holy Ghost discernment, you'll end up ignoring God's Word!

You may accompany your friend in his war - but when the chips are down, he'll hand you over to the enemy. That's just what happened to Jehoshaphat, when he went to war with Ahab. The evil king set up Jehoshaphat to be killed: He told him to dress in his kingly robes, while Ahab himself dressed as a soldier. That way, Ahab reasoned, the Assyrians would go after Jehoshaphat instead of himself.

Ironically, Ahab was killed by an arrow that pierced him through a tiny slot in his armor. And suddenly, Jehoshaphat was surrounded by enemy soldiers, who were ready to cut him to pieces. The king knew he was facing death - and he cried out to God for help. Scripture tells us, *"...and the LORD helped him; and God moved them to depart from him."* (verse 31).

The war was a disaster, just as Micaiah had prophesied. Israel's army fled in disarray, like sheep without a shepherd. And Jehoshaphat retreated to Jerusalem, his friend Ahab dead and his armies defeated. It was only by God's grace he escaped death!

I can imagine the thoughts that must have raced through Jehoshaphat's mind as he hurried back to Jerusalem: "Oh, God - thank you for delivering me! Now I see the danger of walking with an ungodly companion. Never again, Lord! I won't be a part of that worldly system anymore. It's all over now!"

But it wasn't all over. God still had a controversy with this man!

3. The Last and Most Tragic Consequence of Affinity With An Evil Friend Is God's Wrath Upon You!

As Jehoshaphat was on his way home, the Lord sent a prophet out to meet him, with these strong words: *"And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD."* (2.CHR 19:2).

God was saying to Jehoshaphat, "You don't know the danger and consequences of what you've done. You may think it's a light thing to join an affinity with someone who's against me. Ahab was my enemy - an idolater - and you made friends with him. You listened to his wicked talk and indulged his filth. Yet you didn't take a stand against any of it, Jehoshaphat. I have a controversy with you about this!"

At this point, you may be thinking. "I understand that Ahab was evil. But as I consider my own friends, there's no way I can think of them as God's enemies." Yet, consider these passages from scripture:

* *"He that is not with me is against me..."* (LK 11:23). Does your friend take the Lord's side in all things?

* *"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft..."* (1.SAM 15:23). Is your friend's counsel full of rebellion?

* *"...he that condemneth the just...(is an) abomination to the LORD."* (PROV 17:15). Does your friend speak evil of godly people?

This is not a game! Your friends are a serious matter to God - because their actions have serious consequences: *"Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest..."*

Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces..." (PSA 50:19-22).

Listen to the prophet Isaiah: *"For he said, Surely they are my people... in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;... But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them."* (ISA 63:8-10). God actually turns against those who ignore His Word!

In Jehoshaphat's case, God brought war and trouble to Judah: *"It came to pass after this also, that the children of Moab, and the children of Ammon, and with them other beside the Ammonites, came against Jehoshaphat to battle."* (2.CHR 20:1). Up to this time, Judah had enjoyed great peace. But now Jehoshaphat saw enemies coming at him from every side, threatening to destroy his kingdom!

Paul writes, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;"* (ROM 1:18). The apostle is speaking here of people who know the truth yet ignore it, pretending it doesn't exist. Simply put, God's wrath is upon all who suppress the truth, doing nothing about it - like King Jehoshaphat!

Thank God, scripture says, *"And Jehoshaphat feared, and set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah."* (2.CHR 20:3). The king humbled himself and repented: *"And Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground: and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the LORD, worshipping the LORD."* (verse 18).

God responded to Jehoshaphat's brokenness by giving Judah total victory against the Moabites. Finally, the Bible says, *"...the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet: for his God gave him rest round about."* (verse 30).

Let Me Close With This Final Warning:

This matter of choosing friends wisely and cautiously is a lifelong concern. The fact is, you may escape from one unwise relationship - but you can jump right into another!

Scripture tells us Jehoshaphat's story ended tragically: *"And after this did Jehoshaphat king of Judah join himself with Ahaziah king of Israel, who did very wickedly:"* (verse 35). Jehoshaphat did the same thing again! He joined an affinity with evil Ahaziah, just as he'd done with Ahab.

This time God sent a prophet to Jehoshaphat saying, *"...Because thou hast joined thyself with Ahaziah, the Lord hath broken thy works..."* (verse 37). God's Spirit left this once-righteous man - because he wouldn't obey!

Beloved, the Bible is very clear on this matter of friendships: *"Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul."* (PROV 22:24-25). *"As for such as turn aside unto their crooked ways, the LORD shall lead them forth with the workers of iniquity..."* (PSA 125:5).

Take a stand today. If you have ungodly friends in your inner circle, break them off! God in His mercy will deliver you from the bonds of the enemy, as He did Jehoshaphat. But the fact is, you can never stop being alert to satan's attempts to put someone in your life to destroy Christ's work in you.

Pray, "Lord, open my eyes to all my friendships! Help me to see them clearly, whether good or bad, pleasing or not pleasing to You. May all my friendships bring glory to You!"

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